



There's Working, And There's Networking

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

By Jacqueline J. Loewe

Many professionals choose not to improve their relationship-building skills because they assume you are either a "people person" or you are not. For those of us in a "seller-doer" role within our firms, it is assumed we are extroverts with a natural talent for making small talk and easily connecting with people. For those of us in a technical role, we are perfectly content to leave the schmoozing to others so we can focus on meeting project deadlines. But the reality is: everyone is in the business of building professional relationships and with a little training, we all benefit from

enhancing our networking skills.

If you have not already been developing your networking plan, now is the time to get started. The quality and quantity of your professional relationships may have a dramatic impact on your career success and satisfaction. Becoming an active networker is more than attending events and gathering business cards. Seasoned networkers expand their professional networks and take advantage of opportunities to learn new skills, consider alternative professional views and position themselves for new projects.

Improving the way you connect with people in formal and informal business settings is a teachable skill, just like learning how to apply the latest in BIM technology. With proper training, you become more confident in networking settings and you experience tangible results. While learning to become a better connector, it is important to be true to yourself, letting your natural personality drive the manner in which you meet new people. Through training, you will learn how to maximize your personal strengths, become more comfortable and relaxed with the networking process, and make more meaningful connections.

How can you benefit from improving your relationship-building skills?

The lingering effects of the recession on the architecture profession have highlighted the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships with existing clients, other project consultants and co-workers. If you have a strong connection with the people you rely on to deliver a project on time, you are more likely to meet your deadlines and have a satisfied client. In these difficult economic times, competition is fierce and the stakes to keep your existing clients happy have never been higher. The way we keep clients is often the same way we develop new ones. We work to build effective relationships based on trust and confidence. Perhaps the most important skill pertaining to relationships is active listening. By actively listening and being responsive to your clients, consultants and co-workers, you will enhance your individual relationships. You do not need to become best friends with your entire project team, but learning and recalling something about your teammates' background, family or interests outside of work can go a long way in improving communications and getting people invested.

Why should you invest in improving your networking skills if you do not have a business development role in your firm?

Participating in conferences and industry events is a great opportunity to expand your own professional network to learn about changing technical resources, industry trends and new players in the market. Connecting with different people in your industry is invaluable; you never know what information people can share and yes, every once in a while, someone may have insight into an upcoming project that would be a good fit for your firm.

An often-overlooked aspect to networking is preparation. Before you head to that professional dinner or event, think about topics and relevant questions you can ask the people you meet. If possible, review

the attendee list, Google a few people and determine who may be a prospect or knowledgeable industry resource. Be prepared with appropriate conversation and plan to follow up. Demonstrate your genuine interest in the people you are talking with—make it about them, not you.

Think of the relationship-building effort as a multi-stage process. If you connect with someone whom you can help—or who can help you—consider ways to stay in touch over time. People prefer to conduct business with people they like and trust. The first positive impression and subsequent, relevant follow-up can turn a new relationship into a mutually beneficial business contact that lasts your entire career.

Everyone is able to improve on the way

in which he or she enhances business relationships, and the payoff can be enormous. When you expand on the quality and the quantity of the people in your personal network, your career will be the better for it. So go ahead and start a conversation at that industry cocktail party. Your next inspiration or opportunity may come from the person standing right next to you.

Jacqueline Loewe is the founding partner of Sheridan Park Consulting, which provides business development consulting and networking training within the real estate-related professional services arena.

AIA Chicago will host a networking seminar by Loewe on Oct. 20. See page 19 for details.



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